

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AWARENESS WEEK

The secret of good posture arrived in the UK 100 years ago, bringing unexpected rewards

Alexander the great



Is good posture the secret of good health? Its influence on wellbeing could be far greater than you think. For proponents of the Alexander Technique (AT), there's little in the human being that posture doesn't influence.

In the 100 years since it was introduced in the UK, AT has helped thousands of people with widely varying problems. While it is often associated with treating back, neck and joint pain - complaints that it is particularly effective at addressing - AT has been found to help with conditions as wide-ranging as asthma, high blood pressure and cerebral palsy. According to those who use AT, it needs to be experienced to be fully understood. But it works by normalising inappropriate muscle tone, thereby correcting bad posture.

Children have naturally perfect posture but as we get older we fall into bad habits such as slouching, hunching and tensing muscles. Over time this affects the alignment of the spine and surrounding muscles. AT makes you more conscious of your body and posture, re-training you to move in a relaxed way.

The soccer player



Andy Jacques, 32, a journalist from Brighton, is keen, but by his own admission average, footballer. Since he's been practising the Alexander Technique his skills on the pitch have improved immeasurably. "I've been doing AT for three months. I started mainly to improve my posture so I could walk a bit taller and play football with a bit more grace. And it's worked. Last weekend I won player of the tournament. I've never been more than an average footballer, despite playing once a week. But now my awareness is so much better. Usually when I'm playing I can't see much of what's going on around me, but recently I've known where all my team mates are and I'm more relaxed. I seem to have more time on the ball and I feel more graceful. I've had no other coaching and can only put it down to AT."

The teacher



Alexia Brousse, 34, broke her back in a number of places after a car accident in 1986. She recovered but suffered recurring back pain for ten years before discovering AT. "I was lucky not to be paralysed from the accident after suffering a fracture and dislocation in the lumbar region. Surgery repaired the damage but within two years the back pains started. I was working at a computer all day as a secretary and, without knowing it, developed an awful posture. This continued until 1996 when the pain got so bad I had to give up my job. Having tried everything from physiotherapy to homeopathy without success, I gave AT a go. It started working almost immediately. After five lessons, there was a tangible reduction in my pain and within a year I was back to a normal state. I've since trained as an AT teacher and that's what I now do for a living."

Questions and answers

Q *I have a few physical complaints. Will AT be of any use to me?*

A Yes. Seemingly healthy people have benefited from the technique. Many performers use it to improve posture, self-awareness and stamina, while removing bad habits. It is taught in all the major performing arts colleges in the UK. It is also popular with athletes for improving flexibility, timing and efficiency. Sebastian Coe and Linford Christie are among its successful users.

Q *Is there any medical basis to AT?*

A The technique has had support from physicians and surgeons since its inception. Doctors well-informed in the technique are happy to refer patients to AT teachers and referrals are on the increase. Unlike alternative therapies, such as acupuncture and homeopathy, AT is completely consistent with orthodox medical science.

Q *How do I learn AT? Who offers classes?*

A It is taught in one-to-one sessions with teachers who have completed three years of full-time training. The number of lessons you take will depend on your needs. These can be discussed with your teacher. As the technique involves changing long-standing habits, improvement can take time. The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) says 20 to 30 regular lessons give a good foundation for most people.

The founder



AT was developed by FM Alexander (1869-1955) an Australian actor who found he kept losing his voice. By setting up a system of mirrors he found the cause was tension in his neck. Over the next few years he developed a technique to relax the body's muscles and return them to the flexibility of childhood. In 1904 he moved to London where the Shakespearean actor Sir Henry Irving was one of his first pupils. Playwright George Bernard Shaw, novelist Aldous Huxley and Sir Charles Sherrington, the father of modern neurology, also studied with him. In 1931 the BMA urged that doctors be trained in AT. In the same year Alexander opened a training course which continues to certify teachers.